

The pride of Merdeka

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MERDEKA Day celebrations in 1957 started with a big slumber party for Noraishah Che Teh.

"A few days before the declaration of independence, I got a phone call from my late mother-in-law in Bukit Mertajam. She said she was coming down to visit me in Serdang. But I didn't expect her to come with a bus load of Kaum Ibu (the precursor to Wanita Umno) ladies.

"They had no place to stay and couldn't check into a hotel as it was considered unbecoming for a woman to stay in one without a companion in those days."

The women finally decided to bunk at her house while they were in the city. "They told me not to worry as they were well-prepared and had brought everything they needed and were willing to rough it out," Noraishah said.

Equipped with sleeping mats, pillows and cooking pots, and prepared with supplies of salted fish, dried shrimps, rendang, rice, and soy sauce, the women settled down in Noraishah's home. They slept everywhere - in her lounge, the spare bedrooms and even in the dining room.

"It was like a big picnic under one roof," said Noraishah, who herself made history by being one of the first female RTM (then Television Malaya) newscasters in 1963, when the news was first broadcast, in black and white, in Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese and Tamil.

Only 16-years-old in 1957, Noraishah, the sixth of nine children, knew and cared little about patriotism.

"I didn't understand very much then," said Noraishah, who fifty years later is the Wanita Umno Bukit Bintang division chairperson. "I enjoyed all the hoo-hah and the food they prepared, but was not particularly excited about the declaration. I already had the freedom to do the things I liked, so freedom was not an issue," said the Penangite who was raised in Pahang.

"But I knew that this was a big deal for the Kaum Ibu women. Many of them weren't rich and had pawned jewellery to make the trip. I could feel the pride they felt," Noraishah, whose son is the historian and political scientist Dr Farish Noor, told *theSun*.

Curious, and after some persuasion from her mother-in-law, Noraishah went to the Selangor Club Padang on Merdeka eve with a group of friends.

Dressed in *baju kebaya* and *batik sarung*, she piled into a friend's car with five other friends - Malays and expatriates - from her neighbourhood.

"There, we saw Tunku Abdul Rahman and other cabinet ministers on a huge platform biding time. A huge crowd gathered there but unlike current day celebrations with a lot of sing-song, this was a very formal thing. Everyone was just waiting for our flag to be raised."

The clock struck at midnight and *God Save The King* was played while the Union Jack was lowered. What followed was traumatic.

"When the Malayan flag went up and the *NegaraKu* started playing, everyone was very emotional. People were sobbing - tears of pride and sadness, even the expatriates. There were no bad feelings between us and them," she said.

"After the song, everyone started shouting 'Merdeka!' but I wasn't keen to participate. Then someone egged me on and encouraged me to participate, and so I did!"

The night after Aug 31 was a blur of celebration dinners, performances and fireworks.

"There were also many who prayed in mosques, churches and temples around the country. United by our actions, we became one nation that night - and that is the beauty of it."

Fast forward to 50 years later, Noraishah believes that despite the problems we might have, the promise of Merdeka has stayed true to this day.

"We don't call ourselves a Malay Malaysian or an Indian Malaysian or a Chinese Malaysian. We call ourselves Malaysians."



Noraishah at her RTM debut in the early 60s.